



For Reactionaries Only

For Reactionaries Only

by Jack Common

One night last winter I stood watching a gypsy play with fire. He and half his tribe had just turned out of the pub, the men singing and step-dancing in their heavy boots, the women aloof hunching disapproval behind their shawls. Not more than twenty he was, a sturdy lad permanently dirty and unshaven but with a clear out-door look in his eyes which gave you the improbable idea that he would strip white enough, and a shock of hair pushing his cap away from his brow. He made his fire out of newspaper on the cobbles, keeping it between his boots. There was a fair amount of wind blowing, and if you or I had tried the job, it's ten to one we'd have wasted a few matches before we got the thing started and then lost the whole issue when a ground-wind snatched at the flaming paper. But this lad was a real fire-master. He tended the flames that curled back from his corduroyed legs with caressing movements of his hands, as though he was combing a horse's tail. The newspaper he kept bundled up under his jacket so that he could tear off a strip quickly with one hand, twist it, and add it to the blaze. When it was high enough he took out half-a-dozen kippers and laid them on, jammed together as they were. In far too short a time he was treating us all to torn portions of charred but mainly uncooked kipper - a friendly act if not brilliantly successful.

Probably we are particularly liable to be struck by such simple things now because we are bound to doubt whether the so-called civilized life is worth the sacrifices we have to make in order to maintain it. The temptation is to see in the curious grace of the gypsy's fire-drawing evidence of a way of living more whole than ours. In much the same way, a modern anthropologist is able to observe savage communities all the more sympathetically for having left his own people in a high state of war preparation; historians are led to take another look at the ages of barbarism; and artists find inspiration among "primitives" and negro handicrafts. This is reaction, of course; ours is a reactionary period. Well, let's make the best of it. At any rate, we are free for the moment of the collective conceit which puts ourselves on top of all history, right in the van of progress. Not so very long ago practically everyone you knew was a Progressive, and the debate concerned various ways of doing good amiably all round. You would get told off proper if you didn't admit that this was an age of plenty, or that you could have Socialism in our time, or that war could be abolished. Today it is impossible not to suspect your best friend of being a reactionary, and the man who has not been accused of Fascism isn't on the intellectual map at all. What has happened to the Progressives then? I suspect that they got marched over and left behind, so that they are stuck in a last ditch somewhere, dieharding in the defense of democracy while we reactionaries quarrel about how far back we are going. And the way to get

rid of the reactionaries is similar. Why go back to the middle ages with Hitler when the lovely stone age nights are calling you?

From a "savage" point of view we own terrific collective powers but are ourselves deficient in all the natural graces. In singing, dancing, drawing, poetry-making, speaking, and love-making we are pretty deplorable judged by uncivilized standards. We seem to have got caught up in a kind of madly-extreme democracy, so that we bank all on a tremendous queen-bee of a Beethoven and have millions who can't sing at all; or having raised a Shakespeare, from thence on we content ourselves with smoking-room limricks and advertising slogans. What happens is that you have first a simple human pleasure which all join in, then it becomes worked on and specialized into a high art with a large audience delegating their interest to a few skilled performers, and the last stage occurs when the audience no longer keep alive the rhythms in themselves and so do not recognize the skilled delegate when he appears. Thus, if you want to exhaust yourself any time, you cannot do better than try to explain to the ordinary man what you see in chamber music. There is an envoi to this process: there comes a time when the delegates themselves get the wind up at the lack of backing they receive and try to re-shape themselves in accordance with the alleged demands of popular taste. Caesar gives circuses.

Have the rank and file of civilization really become brutish, then? No savage is going to believe that. Periods of high civilization are few and very brief, all about and around them the unadulterated and uncollectivised men are dancing and singing and making a wonder out of words. We have these free rhythms in us all right, but inhibited. So far, civilizations have been clumsy contrivances for swiftly capitalizing the collective human strength for the endowment of a few individuals. Their social training has been a sort of ferreting; stopping-up all the outlets of expression save one, so as to get a concentrated power. Thus it follows that the spread of education to all and sundry does not result in a general increase in the arts of expression. Whatever the intention, the technique is inhibitory. It says, in effect, you shall not make verse or music unless you are prepared to go forth and specialize. The arts now become too difficult for the ordinary man, and few men believe they are capable of them, though as users of tools they often fall easily enough into the rhythm of gesture which is the germ of all arts.

Well, now that this civilization-by-proxy swindle is likely to blow itself up, and we are all of us in a reactionary funk about it, there are two forms of reaction open to us. One is to tighten up the discipline and increase the inhibitions, emphasize the inner tension in actual drills and military formations, forbid even the free art of representative minority and their thought; the other to conduct our own relaxation before the discipline breaks, give back to the ordinary man the power which he delegated to minorities, and so build a dark

age of our own instead of being flung headlong into it in the Roman fashion. The great virtue of a dark age is that it discovers the value of exceedingly simple things: of the love between man and women, for instance; of the good in working a piece of land; of the rare sympathy that springs up in small and poor communities. In a dark age the people begin to make songs of their own, and dances; their speech becomes deintellectualised, so that word-formations accumulate without anyone planning them by rule, and they therefore have a touch of magic in them. We'd enjoy a dark age fine, if it wasn't that they've got a bad name because of the poverty, plague, and social breakdown that they are generally marred with. That may have been because they were accidental, not especially wished-for like ours.

To us the new age opens as an age of exploration. We start on the assumption that all of us are libeled in our collective picture. The sum of our abilities and potentialities, as added up in the accounts of nation, republic, and empire, is quite incorrect. But even if our collectivity represented us as we are, that still leaves out what can be. You know very well that you are much better than you've ever had the chance of being. So am I. So is my mate. Whenever I do happen to exercise a new ability, I find myself speculating on how many potentialities there may be in me that lie rotting. The fact is, nobody knows how good they are. For one freedom, we develop a hundred fears, since society likes a man to have but one face, so that he can be readily catalogued and counted on. Even my gyppo boy, for all his fine unconscious fire-love, is a tongue-tied hobble-decoy half his time.

I believe that mere ordinary man is an Eldorado of infinite potentiality, and that the work of endowed individuals is no more than outcrop gold indicating the quality of the greater mine. Moreover, had that dogma been generally believed, I think we should not have daunted the majority by efforts to lift them up or add to their natural capacities. No man can add a cubit to his stature; and no man needs to. It is enough to free the province of your personhood, that is, to unlearn the fears and inhibitions by which you are lessened. The dark age technique of unlearning is what is needed, and it is not such a strange thing as it seems. We have an acquisitive view of learning as of a thing you add to the personality, this being the opinion proper to an acquisitive society. Yet when you learn to swim you are really escaping from doubt and awkwardness into an innate swimming rhythm which everybody possesses, rather marvelously, whether they use it or not. And queerer than that, there is the case of the recently developed art of cycling. When I took it up, the man who showed me how pointed out that it wasn't a question of learning to ride, what you had to do was to unlearn the inability to ride. He was perfectly right. It is all there if you can get it.

So with the arts and graces which during the stress of a high civilization are slurred over or made remote and rare. We can unlearn the social

self-consciousness which distorts the exercise of the natural rhythms in its effort to compete with the hardy specialist in them. In the end we shall come into our birthright again, and damn those professors of progress who call only the ages of mass-slavery and isolated genius, golden.

[Abbreviated from "*For Reactionaries Only*", originally published in *The Adelphi*, vol. XV, January 1939, and reprinted in *Revolt Against an 'Age of Plenty'*, 1980.]

The Rights of the Horse and the Rights of Man

by Paul Lafargue
(1900)

Capitalist Civilization has endowed the wage-worker with the metaphysical Rights of Man, but this is only to rivet him more closely and more firmly to his economic **duty**.

"I make you free," so speak the Rights of Man to the laborer, "free to earn a wretched living and turn your employer into a millionaire; free to sell him your liberty for a mouthful of bread. He will imprison you ten hours or twelve hours in his workshops; he will not let you go till you are wearied to the marrow of your bones, till you have just enough strength left to gulp down your soup and sink into a heavy sleep. You have but one of your rights that you may not sell, and that is the right to pay taxes."

Progress and Civilization may be hard on wage-working humanity but they both have a mother's tenderness for the animals which stupid bipeds call "lower."

Civilization has especially favored the equine race: it would be too great a task to go through the long list of its benefactions; I will name but a few, of general notoriety, that I may awaken and inflame the passionate desires of the workers, now torpid in their misery.

Horses are divided into distinct classes. The equine aristocracy enjoys so many and so oppressive privileges, that if the human-faced brutes which serve them as jockeys, trainers, stable valets and grooms were not morally degraded to the point of not feeling their shame, they would have rebelled against their lords and masters, whom they rub down, groom, brush and comb, also making their beds, cleaning up their excrements and receiving bites and kicks by way of thanks.

Aristocratic horses, like capitalists, do not work; and when they exercise themselves in the fields they look disdainfully, with contempt, upon the human animals which plow and seed the lands, mow and rake the meadows, to provide them with oats, clover, timothy and other succulent plants.

These four-footed favorites of Civilization command such social influence that they impose their wills upon the capitalists, their brothers in privilege; they force the loftiest of them to come with their beautiful ladies and take tea in the stables, inhaling the acrid perfumes of their solid and liquid evacuations. And when these lords consent to parade in public, they require from ten to twenty thousand men and women to stack themselves up on uncomfortable seats, under the broiling sun, to admire their exquisitely chiseled

forms and their feats of running and leaping. They respect none of the social dignities before which the votaries of the Rights of Man bow in reverence. At Chantilly, not long ago, one of the favorites for the grand prize launched a kick at the king of Belgium, because it did not like the looks of his head. His royal majesty, who adores horses, murmured an apology and withdrew.

It is fortunate that these horses, who can count more authentic ancestors than the houses of Orleans and Hohenzollern, have not been corrupted by their high social station; had they taken it into their heads to rival the capitalists in aesthetic pretensions, profligate luxury and depraved tastes, such as wearing lace and diamonds, and drinking champagne and Chateau-Margaux, a blacker misery and more overwhelming drudgery would be impending over the class of wage-slaves.

Thrice happy is it for proletarian-slave humanity that these equine aristocrats have not taken the fancy of feeding upon human flesh, like the old Bengal tigers which rove around the villages of India to carry off women and children; if unhappily the horses had been man-eaters, the capitalists, who can refuse them nothing, would have built slaughter-houses for slave-workers, where they could carve out and dress boy sirloins, woman hams and girl roasts to satisfy their anthropophagic tastes.

The proletarian horses, not so well endowed, have to work for their peck of oats, but the capitalist class, through deference for the aristocrats of the equine race, concedes to the working horses rights that are far more solid and real than those inscribed in the "Rights of Man." The first of rights, the right to existence, which no civilized society will recognize for laborers, is possessed by horses.

The colt, even before his birth, while still in the fetus state, begins to enjoy the right to existence; his mother, when her pregnancy has scarcely begun, is discharged from all work and sent into the country to fashion the new being in peace and comfort; she remains near him to suckle him and teach him to choose the delicious grasses of the meadow, in which he gambols until he is grown.

The moralists and politicians of the "Rights of Man" think it would be monstrous to grant such rights to the slave-laborers; I raised a tempest in the Chamber of Deputies when I asked that women, two months before and two months after giving birth, should have the right and the means to absent themselves from the factory. My proposition upset the ethics of civilization and shook the capitalist order. What an abominable abomination – to demand for babies the rights of colts.

As for the young proletarians, they can scarcely trot on their little toes before they are condemned to hard labor in the prisons of capitalism, while the colts develop freely under kindly Nature; care is taken that they be completely formed before they are set to work and their tasks are proportioned to their strength with a tender care.

This care on the part of the capitalists follows them all through their lives. We may still recall the noble indignation of the bourgeois press when it learned that the omnibus company was using peat and tannery waste in its stalls as a substitute for straw: to think of the unhappy horses having such poor litters! The more delicate souls of the bourgeoisie have in every capitalist country organized societies for the protection of animals, in order to prove that they can't be excited by the fate of the small victims of industry. Schopenhauer, the bourgeois philosopher, in whom was incarnated so perfectly the gross egoism of the philistine, could not hear the cracking of a whip without his heart being torn by it.

This same omnibus company, which works its human slaves from fourteen to sixteen hours a day, requires from its dear horses only five to seven hours. It has bought green meadows in which they may recuperate from fatigue or indisposition. Its policy is to expend more for the entertainment of a quadrupled than for paying the wages of a biped. It has never occurred to any legislator nor to any fanatical advocate of the "Rights of Man" to reduce the horse's daily pittance in order to assure him a retreat that would be of service to him only after his death.

The Rights of Horses have not been posted up; they are "unwritten rights," as Socrates called the laws implanted by Nature in the consciousness of all men.

The horse has shown his wisdom in contenting himself with these rights, with no thought of demanding those of the citizen; he has judged that he would have been as stupid as man if he had sacrificed his mess of lentils for the metaphysical banquet of Rights to Revolt, to Equality, to Liberty, and other trivialities which to the proletariat are about as useful as a cautery on a wooden leg.

Civilization, though partial to the equine race, has not shown itself indifferent to the fate of the other animals. Sheep, like canons, pass their days in pleasant and plentiful idleness; they are fed in the stable on barley, lucerne, rutabagas and other roots, raised by wage-slaves; shepherds conduct them to feed in fat pastures, and when the sun parches the plain, they are carried to where they can browse on the tender grass of the mountains.

The Church, which has burned her heretics, and regrets that she can't again bring up her faithful sons in the love of "mutton," represents Jesus, under the form of a kind shepherd, bearing upon his shoulders a weary lamb.

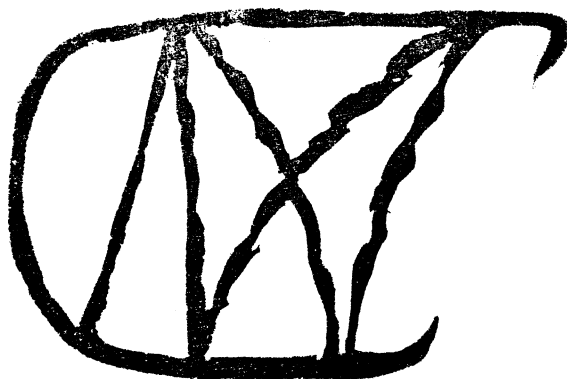
True, the love for the ram and the ewe is in the last analysis only the love for the leg of mutton and the cutlet, just as the Liberty of the Rights of Man is nothing but the slavery of the wage-worker, since our rotten Civilization always disguises capitalist exploitation in eternal principles and bourgeois egoism in noble sentiments; yet at least the bourgeois tends and fattens the sheep up to the day of the sacrifice, while he seizes the slave still warm from the workshop and lean from toil to send him to the shambles of Tonquin or Madagascar.

Slaves of all crafts, you who toil so hard to create your poverty in producing the wealth of the capitalists, arise, arise! Since the buffoons of parliament unfurl the Rights of Man, you should boldly demand for yourselves, your wives and your children the Rights of the Horse!

***If your funny bone was tickled by what you just read, then we recommend that you wash it down with THE RIGHT TO BE LAZY by Paul Lafargue**

Sometimes the most interesting critiques of civilization come from the strangest, most unpredictable and most oblique directions. Such is the case with Jack Common's 1939 mini-masterpiece ***For Reactionaries Only***, a dementedly dark disquisition on the nature of Progress that unfolds into a beautiful piece of writing bleeding with irresistible wonder. As a bonus feature we've paired Common's meditation on a new Dark Age with the sneering attack on civilized "rights", ***The Rights of the Horse and The Rights of Man***, by Marx's disreputable (and disowned) son-in-law Paul LaFargue. The unlikely marriage of these two neglected texts bears thought-provoking fruit, because rarely have the radical edges of the old class-war Left come closer to overlapping with anti-civilization anarchist thought.

Enemy Combatant Publications



Yazoo City, Mississippi